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# Feminine Knots and the Other

## *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

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*Analysis means, etymologically, the undoing of a knot.*

Shoshana Felman, "Postal Survival"

WHEN DEREK BREWER, writing in 1976, declared that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* "is self-evidently the story of Gawain: Morgan and Guinevere are marginal, whatever their significance to Gawain. . . . [T]he protagonist is central, and all must be interpreted in relation to his interests" ("Interpretation" 570, 574), he was arguing from textual assumptions that we now recognize, with the unfair judgment of hindsight, as implicated in a fantasy of textual closure and command.<sup>1</sup> His homogenizing of the text—underwriting, as such acts often do, a gender hierarchy—is observable today as a routine deployment and affirmation of the protocols naturalized by a critical-scholarly establishment. That meaning is produced rather than unproblematically "there" for discovery, and that hidden ideologies stalk each instance of seeming interpretive obviousness, has become axiomatic. We are careful to announce the politics of our reading, to admit at the outset the inevitability of a dialogic and transference relationship between readers and texts.<sup>2</sup>

Underpinning present stories of reading and textuality is a view of the text as a ground simultaneously occupied by presence and absence, a site divided ever and always against itself by conscious and unconscious reflexes. A text is a "weave of knowing and not-knowing" (Spivak 120), a heterogeneous signifying field that, because it is constituted only in and through language, is infected with all the investments of desire, resistances, unrepresentables, and repressions of language itself. "A" text is thus a heuristic fiction, since a text is really many texts in the same body and to select among them for significance is to draw attention to the pragmatics of choice. Because analysis is invariably partial (that is, both incomplete and discursively inflected), traversed like the textwork it questions (and through which it is ques-

tioned) by its own unthought and unsaid (*impensé, non-dit*), the impossibility of mastery must be acknowledged. What remains is the explicit acknowledgment of the specificities of one's particular reading pact.

Under present conditions of reading it is possible to distinguish a feminine text in *Sir Gawain* in those regions where the logic of the poem as the stage of the masculine actors founders and fails. There, at the limit of the masculine narrative—in the repeating moments where masculine command slips and misses—appear the sedimentations of feminine desire: a desire always plural in nature, accommodated to a tracery of spaces in the poem coded as feminine, and signaling its presence through a medley of practices, figures, and signs.

It has disturbed many, for instance, that the founding fiction of the poem turns on the inexplicable design of a woman, the infamous Morgan la Fée, and on the game she sets in motion for reasons so apparently tenuous that they require continual scholarly rehearsal. At once dismissed and elaborately justified by readers, reviled for its improbability and defended as crucial, Morgan's responsibility for the plot mechanism has been resurrected, debated, minimized, multiplied, classified, and reimagined—only to be reappropriated once again (albeit with difficulty) to serve the masculine narrative, whose priority customarily goes unchallenged.<sup>3</sup> Yet the unsettling of the poise and presumed knowledge of that narrative's logic should hinge attention on precisely what escapes and vexes its command, thus serving to gravitate attention toward the vectors of another, intersecting text—a drama of feminine presences in dynamic relationship, whose field of play is referenced, not to the masculine text and its signifieds, but to the figures and turns of a different desire. Repeatedly crisscrossing the narrative plane established by such characters as Gawain, Arthur, and Bertilak and by the worlds of the two courts are, after all, the reticulated angles and interstices of a feminine nexus, a spacing of women; and this other script, read for itself, recuperates the movements of another desire, in a feminine narrative folding into and between the masculine.

To receive the poem from this other direction is to acquire the familiar outlines unfamiliarly, to reconceive their foreignness and difference. Mor-

gan, named “þe goddes,” directs an emissary to the Arthurian court to trigger a drama whose intended destination is Guenevere, the secular queen who is the desired audience or reader of its effects. A player, Gawain, is drawn into Morgan's game, under the apparent patronage of the “heuen-queene,” the Blessed Virgin. In the course of his journey, Gawain's supplication to this Christian goddess for a safe residence in which to perform Christian religious rites, a plaint invoking the personal name of this sacred mistress, Mary (736–39, 754),<sup>4</sup> seems to occasion the appearance of the castle where an aggressively secular courtly mistress (the nameless Lady) resides—the scene for the performance of amatory rites. There a feminine game of seduction is enacted, a seduction of language and identity that forms the principal *aventure* of this romance, but its precise outcome and consequences are veiled from the knightly participant's understanding, being hidden within the screen game of a masculine economy of exchanges. The Lady marks Gawain with her personal sign—a “luf-lace,” or sexualized signifier, which is later disseminated throughout the Arthurian court—as well as with a small neck wound, a token cut that leaves a scar. The end limit of her play is signaled by the Virgin's rescue of “hir knyzt” from “[g]ret perile.” Finally, when the feminine subscript is read to him, Gawain in self-defensive fury attributes all responsibility and power to women, in what is commonly cited as his “antifeminist diatribe,” a tirade witnessing the belief that women dominate and shape the destinies of men. Morgan's signature in the drama is deciphered by the Green Knight, who unravels it backward to the beginning of the poem's action.<sup>5</sup>

This familiar-unfamiliar story transmits the registers of the feminine text, whose key players are curiously elusive, enigmatic women. Plans initiated by one woman are directed at another, performed by a third, and modulated by the actions of a fourth: read in this fashion, the romance is the theater of its feminine figures, a field in which forces of tension and filiation circulate within a feminine relay. Each woman, moreover, even the most shadowy (the Blessed Virgin and Guenevere, who exist principally as names and attenuated presences), is intricately elaborated in multiple identifications with every other woman, so that a

sense of the limits of individual identity is never accomplished, troubled always by the repeated crossing over of division among the women. The result is the emergence of a feminine example in the text of identity as plural, heterogenous, and provisional, elusively reforming elsewhere just as it might seem most fixedly locatable.

### **The Shadow of a Knot: Multiplying Identity and Desire**

Where they first appear, for instance, Guenevere and the Virgin share the status of fetishized objects: Guenevere, evoking the puissance and grandeur of the Arthurian court, by being set in state on her dais, a royal jewel amid other gorgeous treasures;<sup>6</sup> the Virgin, signaling Christian adventitiousness and advocacy, by being blazoned on the inner surface of Gawain's shield like a talisman (74–84, 649). In the framework of the poem, however, Guenevere is also inextricably bound to Morgan by the push and direction of the desire in Morgan's game, which claims Guenevere for its subject; as the desired recipient of the game's meaning or affect, she is to be drawn, willingly or not, into an intersubjective relationship with Morgan.<sup>7</sup> The significance of this uneasy alliance, whose ambiguities bear silent witness to the existence of a prior relationship of undecidable tension between the two women, finally escapes the text, and perhaps Arthurian tradition altogether. Critics who wish to stabilize the meaning of the women's relationship in the context of the poem, however, have sometimes sought to normalize the uncanniness of Morgan's game by characterizing the game itself as a convoluted "chastity test" for Guenevere (e.g., Carson 14; Hulbert 454; Kittredge 132; and Moon 48).

Partnered thus with the Virgin and Morgan, Guenevere is also deliberately linked by spatial and verbal continuities with the Lady, for the Lady's first appearance is peculiarly designed to trigger our memory of Guenevere, whom she simultaneously reproduces and supplants. Like Guenevere in an earlier setting (109), the Lady is seated near Gawain at a magnificent court (1003). Indeed, that tableau of knight and great lady together seems lifted out of one context and transplanted into another—different, yet spatially familiar—with

little alteration in format. The (ap)proximity of the women is skillfully highlighted, moreover, by a remarkable play upon Guenevere's name to describe the Lady's physical person: by being "*wener þen Wenore*"—the orthography here is arguably unique (Silverstein 141n945)—the Lady's bodily beauty is caught and communicated through the body of Guenevere's name, itself the embodiment of beauty in the Arthurian universe (Tolkien, Gordon, and Davis 102n945). Such impressive coincidence inspired one critic to go so far as to advance the hypothesis that the Lady is in fact a second Guenevere, albeit in the guise of the "false Guenevere" of the Old French prose *Lancelot* (Griffith 261).<sup>8</sup>

Other interconnections are hinted at or suggestively relayed. Morgan and the Virgin are like each other in being, unlike others, powerful supernatural figures. Both the Lady and the Virgin, however, perform variations of the courtly mistress<sup>9</sup>—the Virgin materializing in this capacity during a fractional hiatus in the last seduction scene, where she and the Lady are momentarily shown to contend explicitly for Gawain as their desired prize (1768–72). The Lady's desire functions in this instance to create a breach wherein an otherwise unsuspected vein of desire, the Virgin's, may appear, when the Lady's blandishments to Gawain provoke an urgent response from the Virgin—not as "moder," but simply as "Maré," a jealous mistress calling back "*hir knygt*" from the brink of erotic surrender to another woman (1769; italics mine). At this brief intervention, the only explicit textual recognition of the Virgin as a player in Morgan's theater, one more nucleus of desire is suddenly made visible. In that instant, another scene breaks through, displacing the male-female contest between Gawain and the Lady and at the same time reversing the earlier relationship between that knight and the sacred patron whose image is caught on his shield, for it is now not the Virgin but Gawain who stands revealed as the captive, prized object; he is contended over by two female players in a drama that is suddenly elsewhere—no longer between the sexes but within the psychomachia of a feminine narrative.<sup>10</sup>

The example par excellence of conjunction and identification among the women in the poem remains, nonetheless, the extraordinary relationship

between Morgan and the Lady. Critics whose arguments may dramatically diverge in other respects often concur in identifying each of them as the other's double (Carson 6, 15; Clark and Wasserman 69n22; L. H. Loomis 535; R. S. Loomis 89; Moon 44–46; Williams 49, 52)—that is, as a split in the subject that has been projected outward. While every woman in the poem may be said to refigure another—to function as a point of reference and construction, an other for the others—the twinned descriptions of Morgan and the Lady adopted by the text particularly insist on the characters' simultaneous differentiation and nondifferentiation.<sup>11</sup> As nonidentical doubles, they are awarded diametrically contrasting, virtually symmetrical qualities at their first appearance, each establishing a specular surface for the other as its near opposite, and being thoroughly constituted therefore as the other's reference. The specular relationship between the two women situates both in an exchange, a filiation of identities, that finally works to obscure the horizon of their division:

Bot vnlyke on to loke þo ladyes were,  
 For if þe zonge watz zep, zolze watz þat oþer;  
 Riche red on þat on rayled ayquere,  
 Rugh ronkled chekez þat oþer on rolled;  
 Kerhofes of þat on, wyth mony cler perlez,  
 Hir brest and hir bryzt þrote bare displayed,  
 Schon schyrer þen snawe þat schedez on hillez;  
 Þat oþer wyth a gorger watz gered ouer þe swyre,  
 Chymbled ouer hir blake chyn with chalkquyte  
     vayles,  
 Hir frount folden in sylk, enfoubled ayquere,  
 Toreted and treleted with tryflez aboute,  
 Þat nozt watz bare of þat burde bot þe blake  
     brozes,  
 Þe tweyne yzen and þe nase, þe naked lyppez,  
 And þose were soure to se and sellyly blered;  
 A mensk lady on molde mon may hir calle,  
     for Gode!  
 Hir body watz schort and þik,  
 Hir buttokez balz and brode,  
 More lykkerwys on to lyk  
 Watz þat scho hade on lode. (950–69)

That is to say, Morgan and the Lady form a hyphenated term in the narrative of desire—their representation a conspicuous instance of dou-

bling, which at the same time doubles up as the representation of, or figure for, a conspicuous slippage of meaning and decidability in the text.<sup>12</sup> By being alike and unlike, by appearing now as subordinate, now as superior, to each other, Morgan and the Lady figure the ease of misrecognition and the concomitant difficulty of anchoring textual significance or responsibility. For the Lady, who appears the dynamic (and sole) female speaking subject, that individual whose desire seems to activate and dispose the drama of seduction, is discovered in her articulation with Morgan to be herself spoken, a term in the lexicon of Morgan, who is silent, the subject without speech, but the accents of whose desire nonetheless apparently play upon, and at least in part produce, the Lady's own desire, which then assumes the character of a ventriloquized double.

Having thus argued that the construction of each woman entails a point of anchoring in another—and, through the dissemination of traces, in the others of that other—one might go on to suggest that a simple, schematic graph of feminine relationships in the poem would plot an interlinked, overlapping tracery, culminating in a pattern not unlike the familiar one invoked in the pentangle description. Like each constituent of the pentangle, the path of every woman in the poem is articulated with that of every other, so that each approximately “vmbelappez and loukez in oþer,” “vchone . . . in oþer, þat non ende hade” (628, 657), a knitting together that reproduces the shadow of a different “endeles knot” in the poem—a knot of the feminine and the figure of another desire and its text.<sup>13</sup>

### A Tale of Two Knots: Or, Desire in the Sign

Unsurprisingly, a knot of some kind in *Sir Gawain* is always a place where the pressure of an investment speaks itself—a moment of becoming visible. It offers up that revealing “detail” which Naomi Schor theorizes in her now historic feminist readings, *Breaking the Chain* and *Reading in Detail*, that peculiar hitch or halting point in a text on which attention catches, and which announces the working of a certain demand. The pentangle and love lace, notorious examples of the knot, are also knots of this kind. In the narrative ambit, the

pentangle marks the site of a second model of identity, one contextualized as masculine by association with Gawain. Although the example of the women in the poem would seem to set forth a view that identity (and desire) remains always multiple and unfinished, there persists nevertheless a competing suggestion—expressed more explicitly through the intertwined descriptions of pentangle and Gawain—that knightly identity can still in some circumstances be somehow singular and undivided, static and finished. As the sign for Gawain and his perfect knighthood, the “perfect” knot is glossed as that which is permanently in place, whole. Never requiring to be tied, untied, or retied, the pentangle is the ultimate guarantee, on the symbolic level, for the existence of fixed and stable identity: the basis of that identity, its completeness and closure, being here predicated on a reassuringly exact equivalence between the announcement of Gawain’s attributes and his actual possession of them—or, expressed in linguistic values, on the absolute adequacy of referent to sign. Just as the pentangle is the sign for which Gawain is the perfectly corresponding referent, we are to understand, so must the declaration of Gawain’s virtues—the sign—find its own perfect referent also in his possession of them. This wishful vision undergoes an important correction when the pentangle as a personal emblem for Gawain is subsequently overtaken by an “imperfect” knot (Eadie, “Sir Gawain”; Englehardt 225; Kiteley 48; Malarkey and Toelken 20; Taylor 10), that which fastens and unfastens the love lace and, therefore, stands as its synecdoche (Heatt 342–43). With the substitution of an imperfect knot, the Lady’s lace, for the pentangle, a signifier is produced that situates identity as more tenuous and incomplete—a fragile, uncertain prospect that is always on the verge of unraveling and reconstitution in infinitely varied sequences of possibility.

Significantly, pentangle and love lace can organize the question of identity and its representation only through an intimate association with the Virgin and the Lady, the two female figures for whom they exist as markers. For the pentangle is no more than the outside of what is inside Gawain’s shield: the image of the Virgin (as, in a parallel example, the host’s exchange-of-winnings game is the outside of, and camouflage for, the

hostess’s seduction game). When the five sets of virtues that trace the outline of the pentangle are being described, the image of the Virgin suddenly appears, interrupting and displacing the series that supposedly produces her (the fourth set of virtues being the apparent trigger of her emergence), as she later displaces and substitutes for the pentangle in her protection of Gawain during his severest testing. Heatt astutely notices that the pentangle, mentioned once and never again, is something of a decoy, a tactical diversion:<sup>14</sup>

Gawain’s chief fealty seems to be to the Virgin. Her image appears on one side of his shield; the pentangle, the symbol of 5 in the poem, appears on the other. One of his 5 classes of excellences has to do with the 5 joys of Mary (646–47). She apparently helps him in his most need when Bertilak’s wife is closest to seducing him (1768–69). (354n25)

Pentangle and Virgin’s picture together collocate (co-locate) what Jacqueline Rose has called in a different context “the twin axes of identification and fantasy” (141), the continuousness of the pentangle allegorizing the linking up of all points of Gawain’s imaginary subjectivity, in order that a particular fantasy of identity might be authorized and sustained. The pentangle hypothesis is thus a metaphysical statement of presence, the presence of a fully confirmed and locatable identity in a ground of ultimate reference. It stands, moreover, for an aspiration, a psychic yearning that takes up and reenacts an archaic, preoedipal moment of fantasmatic plenitude—the moment of presubjectal infancy, where loss and uncertainty, division, are still absent—since it leads back inexorably, umbilically, via the route of an uncut knot, the pentangle, to the (divine) mother whose image appears on the other side, “[i]n þe inore half.”<sup>15</sup>

But however compelling this fantasy of an uncut knot leading back to a mother might be, the force of its authority has already begun to slip away with the attempt to make of the pentangle an absolutely intact knot, always and everywhere present to itself. For it must be remembered that the comforting illusion of unity and continuity that the pentangle design supports is also a condition that renders impossible a sufficient separation, or a proper spacing, of the five points and

their constituent sets of virtues in such a way as to discriminate their meaning(s): since the possibility of establishing such meaning, such differentiation, is contingent on the activity of that punctuated series of breaks which, paradoxically, enables individual units of signification to combine for the making of overall intelligibility. If the points and virtues of the pentangle can never be “sundred” or “samned” (659), neither can they be held apart and distinguished: lacking lack, or imperfection, their meanings run one into another endlessly without the punctuation of a gap. The apparently different (and meaning[s]-full) qualities gathered by the pentangle are then finally *indifferent*: faultlessness in actions (“fyngres”), senses (“wyttez”), and trust (in “þe fyue woudez”) would absorb, or seamlessly vanish into, “fraunchyse,” “felaȝschyp,” “clannes,” “cortaysye,” and “pité”; and even as a group, though claimed in the poem’s critical history for specifically Christian virtues, these properties are equally indifferent, collectively, from courtly ones (Spearling, *Gawain-Poet* 197).<sup>16</sup>

The inference is useful in a cautionary way for the rest of the poem, since it positions a reminder that the determined pursuit of determination invariably misses its object, issuing instead in an indetermination that signals the failure of every attempt at containing and regulating, policing, a sign. Such an attempt would require abbreviating the sign—which, *qua sign*, is characteristically unstable and traversed by excess—into a cipher, with the incidental but concomitant effect here of also rewriting Gawain into a simplified palimpsest, the subject of (and subjected to) the provenient univocality of the pentangle logos: very simply, only a pentangle(s) knight. But the patient investment of the pentangle’s abstract geometry, itemized over forty-three lines in the poem (an effort sometimes thought to be wholly improvised, its signification here being arbitrary rather than traditional),<sup>17</sup> only produces an overinvested sign and an overdetermination of meaning, that is the very symptom of excess; so that it quickly becomes difficult even to tell whether the pentangle “acordez” to Gawain because it functions as a description of, a prescription for, an aspiration by, an inspiration to, or a flattering idealization of that knight.<sup>18</sup> In the end, to the questions, What exactly—and, as

important, how exactly—does the pentangle, in its sum and parts, signify? and, What is the precise relation of that signification, if any, to Gawain? there remains only the suspension of the possibility of answer.

Inasmuch as the pentangle is an abstract, bodiless sign, the girdle is a sign that is also a fully material object, one that carries, in its function and appearance, the impress and memory of the body itself. It is a detail of encirclement bearing the mark of the body and becomes metonymically, in the course of the Lady’s theater of seduction, a sexualized, desiring, feminine term. It is an object, moreover, that mirrors the concentricity of other encirclements mapping out the poem: the circle of the Lady’s arms pinioning Gawain (1224); the circumambient, overlapping spheres of influence (the Green Knight’s, the Virgin’s, Bertilak’s, the Lady’s) in which the knight is caught; Gawain in the circle of Bertilak’s household; the brief, enframing histories, or “chronicle” accounts that trace the circumference of this romance; the beheading game that surrounds and holds within it the other two games, the exchange of winnings and the seduction; and Gawain’s innumerable physical adventures with “wormez,” “wolues,” “wodwos,” “bullez and berez, and borez,” “etaynez” that are constructed as a circling outer edge, the before and after of his feminine adventure with language. A narrative within narratives, a game inside games, an adventure enclosed by adventures: reading anatomically, concentrically, from this term of the body, the Lady’s, we arrive at “the odd truths revealed in the accidental [but never innocent] material of language . . . a different kind of reading, no longer a sublimated relation to the spirit of the text, but an intercourse with its body” (Gallop 29)—a reading enabled, invited, by the imprint of a female body on a sign and its macrostructural reverberations throughout the text.<sup>19</sup> By contrast, the cut that Gawain receives, extending causatively from the Lady’s successful imposition of her girdle, is the imprint of a sign on a body (the Lady’s on Gawain’s). Transferred from the pentangle, where it does not appear, to the girdle (a circle with a break in it, a cut), where it does, and thereafter to Gawain’s body, this cut may be read there as the vestige of a displacement, the trace of a symbolic behead-

ing that is itself displaced from, and vestigially symbolic of, castration: the organizing dynamic in a psychic economy marked as masculine. That this gash vanishes, leaving only the residue of a scar to suggest its former place, even as the girdle travels successfully across several signifying systems, passing from the Lady's, to the Green Knight's, to Gawain's, and finally into the signifying system of the entire Arthurian court and its history, might be read, therefore, as a fantasied, fabulous parable of the subtextual narrative—a "speculative turbulence" that imagines another, feminine, organization of greater mobility imbricated with and overtaking the masculine (of which something nonetheless remains, in the scar that is the *entre-deux*).<sup>20</sup>

### **Feminine Terms: Signifying Mobility and Transformation**

If the pentangle is the "too much," an overspecification that must fail, the girdle is the "too little," or underspecification that facilitates the girdle's retroping at an exigent moment in the Lady's third engagement with Gawain<sup>21</sup>—in order that her desire, momentarily blocked and at an impasse, can negotiate a passage by being mapped onto and disseminated through the object. Before the transfer can be accomplished, however, Gawain's objections and extreme suspiciousness, roused to keenness by the Lady's theater of seduction, have to be overcome. In the intimate circumstances of this final appointment (a man's private bedchamber, a beautiful seductress, provocative "luf-talkying," the exchange of kisses—all in an aura of intimacy and secrecy, "we bot oure one") any gift from the Lady, especially one worn on her body (whether a personal token of jewelry, such as her ring, or an item of clothing, like her girdle), would carry a strongly sexual coloring, be inflected by an unmistakably erotic charge. Gawain's polite but determined refusal of the Lady's ring aptly communicates his recognition of the field of suggestion the offer invokes.<sup>22</sup> The prospect of the girdle as a gift is complicated, moreover, by a further difficulty, in that the girdle's meaning as a sign, even outside the context of seduction and lacking commentary of any kind in the poem, is perhaps already overfamiliarly cathected. Friedman and

Osberg brilliantly argue, for instance, that the history of the girdle in tradition and literature conveys so heavy a burden of intimate contact with the feminine—with female sexuality and fertility, genitalia, "cosmic sovereignty," heroism and magic (304)—and so forcefully communicates the idea of binding, to exact the "psychic adherence" and "mystical incorporation" of whoever accepts and wears the girdle, that these intimations must be carefully veiled or dissembled when the object is presented (303, 309).

The Lady, in an inspired retroping, accordingly codes her proffered gift as a magical rather than a sexual object (perhaps "magical because sexual," say Friedman and Osberg [307]), a move assisted by conspicuous textual silence on the meaning of this sign. Already caught in an appearance of churlishness, having repeatedly denied the Lady's requests, Gawain responds with relief to this other form of seduction and hence arrives at a serious misrecognition: he mis-takes the detour and occlusion of the Lady's desire for its renunciation. For, undetected by him, her desire has already turned aside, and by covering over its apparition, the Lady manages to trick Gawain into receiving the instrument of its conveyance, as she makes her gift appear entirely innocent, a mere aid to Gawain's earnest wish to escape imminent death in the beheading game. With the acceptance of her girdle for its putative magic, however, the desire Gawain believes to be his own becomes annexed to that of the Lady, the Other—and functions, thereupon, as the deflected-reflected form of the other's desire. The apparent integrity of Gawain's will, carefully maintained through all his encounters with the Lady, also proves to be an illusion, since his will exists here only as a mirrored sliver of the will of the other to which he has become accomplice. The girdle is then the join at which two registers of desire meet, the junction of a triumphal capture.<sup>23</sup>

'Now forsake ȝe þis silke,' sayde þe burde þenne,  
'For hit is symple in hitself? And so hit wel  
semez.

Lo! so hit is littel, and lasse hit is worþy;  
Bot who-so knew þe costes þat knit ar þerinne,  
He wolde hit prayse at more prys, parauntere;  
For quat gome so is gorde with þis grene lace,

While he hit hade hemely halched aboute,  
 þer is no habel vnder heuen tohewe hym þat myȝt,  
 For he myȝt not be slayn for slyȝt vpon erþe.<sup>7</sup>  
 Þen kest þe knyȝt, and hit come to his hert  
 Hit were a juel for þe jopardé þat hym iugged were:  
 When he acheued to þe chapel his chek for to fech,  
 Myȝt he haf slypped to be vnslayn, þe sleȝt were  
 noble.  
 Þenne he þulged with hir þrepe and þoled hir to  
 speke,  
 And ho bere on hym þe belt and bede hit hym  
 swyþe—  
 And he granted and hym gafe with a goud wylle—  
 (1846–61)

With the Lady's subsequent plea to Gawain to "lelly layne" her gift "fro hir lorde," however, the temporary attribution she has improvised for the girdle falls away, and the girdle is returned to its role as a guilty prop in a presumed love scene—

And bisoȝt hym, for hir sake, disceuer hit neuer,  
 Bot to lelly layne fro hir lorde; þe leude hym  
 acordez  
 þat neuer wyȝe schulde hit wyt, iwysse, bot þay  
 twayne  
 for noȝt;  
 He þonkked hir oft ful swyþe,  
 Ful þro with hert and þoȝt. (1862–67)

—the very scene that has been acted out, though never to its completion and always with great care on Gawain's side to prevent self-incrimination, in all their private encounters together, including this final occasion. As something to be concealed from a rightful husband, the girdle is by inference a love gift; and the necessity of its concealment entails a guilty conspiracy of silence that instates two persons, "þay twayne," in an apparent transgression against a third, in effect producing a version, albeit here in a form empty of content, of the common courtly theme of triangulated, adulterous love. The text goes on to hint of the return of the girdle's other cathexis: "Twice (ll. 1874, 2438) the girdle is called a 'luf-lace,' once (2033) a 'drurye,' glossed by the editors as a 'love-token,' the same word later applied by the poet to the illicit dalliance of Merlin and Morgan" (Friedman and Osberg 307).

Thereafter, each occasion of unknotting and

reknottting witnesses the girdle's passage into and out of other, subsidiary vocabularies and lexical frames. It is a magical prophylactic to Gawain when it leaves the Lady (doubly prophylactic, in that it is thought to ward off both death and further sexual demands from the Lady). Immediately after the Green Knight's revelations, however, Gawain seeks to make of the girdle the conveniently extrovertible carrier of his moral unease—that part of him he attempts to excoriate from his "kynde," or true authentic nature, in an orgy of symbolic excision: flinging away the offending (part-)object and transferentially attributing to all womankind, woman's "kynde" (including, by tacit accusation, the Lady), the worst, false, and now presumably extruded portion of that nature.<sup>24</sup> The expurgation apparently complete, Gawain can then take up the girdle again, but explicitly as "syngne"—that is, as a thing that he sees as a-part from him, separate, and with which he exists only in a proximate confabulation. Gawain's rendering of the girdle as "syngne" thus slyly testifies to the tactical apprehension of a distinction between an inside characterized as Gawain and an outside characterized as an overlay, his "faut," "surfet," "fayntyse." That division is interposed through the subtle deployment of two tropes during his public self-accounting to Arthur's court: first, a trope of capture, where an unsuspecting Gawain is supposedly "tan" by "vntrawþe" imaged like a waiting trap; and second, a trope of infection, where the same "untrawþe" is visualized as a kind of extrinsic disease, which fastens ("is tachched") upon Gawain, creating an ailment that is then "caȝt" by the hapless victim (2508–12). Even as Gawain is passionately averring that his "harme" can never be removed from him, therefore ("twynne wil hit neuer"), his mechanism of strategic distancing, of inserting a space between what is self and what is not-self (but an unfortunate supplement or addition devised by a woman), has already enacted a scenario of self-removal, an escape through the disjunctions afforded by metaphor.<sup>25</sup>

Where the girdle as a sign is intended by Gawain to deliver an alibi of sorts, it appears to promise his erstwhile adversary, the Green Knight, the possibility of mastery and command over the Lady's text and all its strategies. By claiming the girdle as his possession ("my wede") in his disclosures to

Gawain, the Green Knight is able also to lay claim to rightful ownership of the seduction game after the fact (“I wrozt hit myseluen”) and thereby assert his dominion over its supervisor, the Lady (“my wyf”). To legitimate his access to the girdle, he artfully alludes to its colors, green and gold, which are pointedly his own colors as well (“For hit is grene as my goune,” “þat is golde-hemmed”),<sup>26</sup> and stealthily reintroduces the motif of the hunt, a motif we are habituated to think of as belonging to him, by casually offering Gawain the girdle for a souvenir: “And I gif þe, sir, þe gurdel . . .” (2358–96). That single gesture at once recalls all the earlier instances when, in his role as Bertilak the hunter, he had offered other prizes to Gawain, and it surreptitiously reconstructs the girdle as merely another of his trophies to give away, a prize, this time from a manhunt. It is a move that seeks to eclipse the primacy of the Lady’s part and her responsibility for the stalking of Gawain, since it works to dissolve the specificity of her particular subtle hunt and all its scenes into a panoramic generality of hunts dominated by Bertilak—the Green Knight: the Lady’s project is to appear as only one act in a grander, vaster design overseen by a male supervisor, with its crucial preeminence accordingly withheld.

The potential violence of the move is immediately disengaged, however, by the slipperiness of the girdle as a sign. Once Gawain’s brief, furious outburst has served its intended task of suggesting his innate innocence, he lapses quite unself-consciously into calling the girdle a “luf-lace,” a reference that meaningfully signals the quiet surfacing, once again, of the Lady’s discourse (2438). With this recurrence, the layers of signification wrought by the Lady return to haunt the text, and her desire overshadows the momentum of refiguration, fleetingly halting it. That is to say, feminine desire breaks in to dispel (*dis-spell*, *unspell*) the masculine assertion of mastery at the very juncture where that control and mastery would seem most secure: riding the protean elusiveness of the sign, feminine desire doubles back on, and ironizes, in a countermovement, the process of the girdle’s refiguration.<sup>27</sup> In that moment when masculine discursive command falters—at the point where the sign slips away from the narrative in which it has been ambitiously embedded—the

feminine text ineluctably emerges once again. To expand and consolidate its moment, this incursion by the feminine dilates into a celebratory testament to Morgan la Fée: in a dizzying turnaround, the Green Knight not only admits Morgan’s overarching authority and powers in an astonishing, prolonged excursus—an admission that represents him no longer as master-manipulator but only as a servant, and Morgan’s obedient creature—but also hints at the extent of her reach and possible status, when he respectfully describes her as “Morgne þe goddes” (2446–67).

The slippery reversals of hierarchy and priority asserted in the quick substitution of one construction after another (the Lady’s, Gawain’s, the Green Knight’s, the Lady’s again, then Morgan’s) echo once more when the girdle, in its final appearance toward the end of the poem, metamorphoses into a “bauderyk” and multiplies in number at the Arthurian court. There, Gawain’s gloomy projection of the girdle as a penitential sign—his lodging it, in other words, within a closed signifying system that would stabilize its meaning along a moral-ethical axis, with himself at the center—is given short shrift by Arthur and the knights. The court refuses Gawain’s melancholy prognosis, with its joy and laughter,<sup>28</sup> and Arthur overturns the girdle’s signification once again by quite literally turning the sign over on its side, an act that records its entrance into yet another order of reference by mutating it into another object altogether, a girdle-become-baldric. But even here in its celebrated afterlife the referent(s) of the once-girdle cannot be grasped with any finality. So much may be hazarded by that sign—perhaps joy, affection, honor, esteem, renown, a lesson, a romance, a counternarrative, a postscript, and, not least of all, the allegorized fable of an endless desire—that its signifying horizon vanishes at the very point where its multiplication and dispersal take effect. With the girdle-baldric firmly ensconced as an institution, the chronic uncertainty and dilation of desire staged through it are dramatically enshrined also as permanent conditions.

It is because the girdle is furnished as a material structure organized around a break (a girdle, by definition, can only be built around an imperfect knot, whose provisionality holds open the possibility of continued use) that the object so

aply lends itself to a demonstration of the properties of the linguistic signifier. For the infrastructural detail that accommodates the girdle to repeated use also accommodates it to the accumulation of diverse referents as it moves across the levels of the text, unknotting from within one discursive modality to be remade within another, in a progression that attests, perhaps invites, continual attempts at rescripting its signification. After a time, something very like an allegory of language or a narrative of the sign is collected, a signifier for language, for the operation and play of linguistic difference, a signifier for the signifier, no less. Yet something further takes place with this staging of the sign, this putting-into-effect of the girdle-as-sign within the poem. Etymologically, Shoshana Felman remarks in an extraordinary aside, “analysis” (a word we may identify as coextensive with the reading process, and for which, perhaps, it may do service) means “the undoing of a knot” (“Postal Survival” 71). That is to say, the specter of a knot coalesces at the precise moment and location in the text where analysis-reading is to occur; and our performance of that twin activity takes on, or mimes, the activity of the open, imperfect knot, the knot of the girdle, in that we constantly repeat the gestures of unraveling and reconstitution that are conditioned—indeed, demanded—by the character of the knot itself.<sup>29</sup>

For a polemical afterword to this never-ending story of the sign, it would be timely to recapitulate that it is by the agency and operation of the sign that Gawain is marked over twice in pivotal sequences in the poem, first by the pentangle, and then by the girdle—he is re-marked, re-signed—in a kind of double writing, or writing double, by the feminine, in the style and signature of the feminine text.<sup>30</sup>

Felman seems to speak to just such attitudes as these when she suggests that we learn “how to read femininity; how to *stop reading* through the exclusive blind reference to a masculine signified, to phallogocentric meaning” (“Rereading” 27). Unfortunately—but perhaps unsurprisingly—Brewer extends his confident pronouncements on female marginality to the readers of poems as well. Writing some ten years before Valerie Krishna’s production of a critical edition of the alliterative *Morte Arthure* (and eighteen years before Mary Hamel’s), he finds this text “a fascinating poem for any middle-aged soldiers and politicians who may be able to read a slightly difficult Middle English dialect: not much likely to attract women and undergraduates” (“Courtesy” 82).

<sup>2</sup>Dramatically changing interests perceptible in the reception of the poem over the last several decades might in themselves force a recognition of this relationship. See Bloomfield for a brief survey of general trends in criticism and scholarship from the nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century; see also the annotated bibliography by Blanch (*Reference Guide*). For succinct theorizations of the reader-text relationship from the viewpoint of French psychoanalysis, see Felman, “To Open,” and Brooks.

<sup>3</sup>The practice is so habitual that it escapes particular notice. Examples include Benson; Burrow; Eadie, “Morgain” 303 and “Sir Gawain” 60–61; Eagan 83; Hulbert 454; Kittredge 132–36; L. H. Loomis; Spearing, *Gawain-Poet*; Williams; and the lively Baughan-Friedman dispute—with Mertens-Fonck representing a curious exception. More recently, feminist essays, while continuing to read the poem as the narrative of its masculine characters—thus unintentionally colluding with the masculine text once again to confirm the marginality of the women—have nonetheless argued the putative marginality in politically useful ways. (See, e.g., Fisher’s “Leaving Morgan Aside.” Her more nuanced “Taken Men and Token Women,” which unfortunately appeared after the completion of my paper, could not be taken into account here.) My own retroping of the narrative pretext in the register of an unfamiliar-familiar story of elusive, enigmatic women aims at evoking, not (inherently) marginalized figures, but the resonances of a countertext that erodes the assumption of an all-powerful masculine narrative.

<sup>4</sup>All line references to *Sir Gawain*, henceforth designated by numbers alone, are to the Tolkien, Gordon, and Davis edition. Like the editors, I follow Israel Gollancz’s lead in spelling the Green Knight’s name *Bertilak*. A reader’s report leads me to believe I should clarify my use of citations from the poem’s critical tradition in support of my arguments. It might appear to some that by selectively abstracting material from the poem’s critical history that happens to coincide with my views (much of this material often being buried in, or incidental to, the writing of the authors I cite), I am generating an impression of critical continuity for my reading strategy: I should therefore perhaps state the obvious—that the authors I quote in my support would not, in fact, necessarily support or approve the ways in which I deploy their work, and that the points of convergence that seem to emerge effortlessly between parts of my arguments and theirs are sometimes the result of a highly inflected, polemical, and

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Another instance where feminine agency is bypassed or minimized by an influential critic is represented in an otherwise unexceptionably fine reading by Spearing: it is, he says, “the poet” and “the plot of the poem,” not Morgan or the Lady, that act against Gawain (*Gawain-Poet* 190). Shoshana

admittedly interested retropping of the criticism and scholarship on the poem.

<sup>5</sup>Because limitations of space require me to focus my discussion narrowly, I concentrate on two important structural cruxes in the poem—the pentangle and the girdle—though they make up only one skein of the feminine narrative summarized here. I am, however, currently revising a paper that teases out another strand of the feminine text, examining sexuality, erotic speech, theatricality, courtly relations, and gender identity in the seduction scenes (see the biographical note accompanying this article).

<sup>6</sup>“Guinevere . . . seems transformed from a person into an elegant courtly artifact” (Hanning 11). We may wish to remember, in the context of her talismanic place in the Arthurian court—on display, framed by other precious objects, each announcing the court’s magnificence and plenitude—that Freud’s essay “Fetishism” apportioned to the fetish the work of both marking an absence and simultaneously warding off any recognition of absence.

<sup>7</sup>One purpose of the game, according to Bertilak, is “to haf greued Gaynour and gart hir to dyze” (2460). Guenevere is also strategically conjoined with Morgan in being a silent presence at court, like Morgan accessible only through the response of others to her. Fisher observes, with wit and acuity, that the women are positioned at opposite ends of the poem—Guenevere at the beginning, Morgan at the close—with the Lady occupying the middle (“Leaving” 135).

Among the critics invoking the tradition of hostility or competition between Guenevere and Morgan are Carson 14; Clark and Wasserman 64; Friedman 268; R. S. Loomis 88, 115; Mertens-Fonck 1075; Moon 56–57; Novak 122; and, most notably, Paton, esp. 60. The Middle English *Sir Launfal* and Marie de France’s *Lanval* dramatize tension between Guenevere and a fairy mistress—and many believe (following Paton or Loomis, French or Celtic schools of source scholarship) that Morgan is a celebrated representative of this type. Myra Olstead’s persuasive hypothesis that the “larger than life” figure of the courtly mistress has its origin in supernatural women, including the fay, would further reduce the distance between Guenevere and Morgan—perhaps finally conflating them (128–29).

<sup>8</sup>Eagan hints at another connection between Guenevere and the Lady (72), through the nearly identical descriptions of the tapestries that form part of the backdrop against which each of the women appears, the “tapites” from “tars” around Guenevere and the “[t]apitez . . . of tuly and tars” in Gawain’s bedchamber, the Lady’s setting (77, 858).

<sup>9</sup>Many have argued or assumed that the Virgin, though a divine figure, functions for Gawain as a courtly mistress. Novak remarks that, viewed as Gawain’s lady, she conjoins the themes of chastity and troth (127–28); Spearing describes Gawain as the Virgin’s “man” (*Gawain-Poet* 196); McAlindon calls him “Mary’s knight” (126); Taylor mentions his “allegiance to Mary” (11); and Heatt points out that Gawain’s “chief fealty” belongs “to the Virgin” (354n25). Gawain thrice invokes the personal form of her name, Mary—when he is cold and lonely on Christmas Eve (737, 754) and again on the first morning with the Lady (1263). Significantly, it is as

“Maré” that she intervenes between him and the Lady at the critical moment on the third morning (1769). Thus deployed, a commonplace medieval topos—the eroticized (but necessarily sublimated) relationship between a knight and the Blessed Virgin—assumes a strategic discursive shape and significance in this text.

<sup>10</sup>The images of the Lady and the Virgin telescope complex psychic discourses of the feminine that extend far beyond the poem to operate an infinitely suggestive tension between secular and sacred forms of literature in the Middle Ages. Since C. S. Lewis’s *Allegory of Love* in 1958, much has been written on the courtly mistress’s vexed relationship to the Virgin Mary. Kristeva’s distinguished formulation in the brilliant and provocative “Stabat Mater” falls somewhere between strictly historicist and broadly universalizing models: “Initially, the cult of the Virgin, which assimilated Mary to Jesus and pushed asceticism to an extreme, seems to have contrasted sharply with courtly love for the noble lady. . . . Yet even in its carnal beginnings courtly love had this in common with Mariolatry, that both Mary and the Lady were focal points of men’s aspirations and desires. Furthermore . . . both were embodiments of an absolute authority that was all the more attractive because it seemed not to be subject to the severity of the father. This feminine power must have been experienced as power denied, all the more pleasant to seize because it was both archaic and secondary, an ersatz yet not less authoritarian form of the real power in the family and the city, a cunning double of explicit phallic power” (106–07). For a representative Anglo-American feminist account, see Penny Schine Gold’s *Lady and the Virgin*.

Interestingly, the Lady and the Virgin also appear in a line Spearing identifies as the “sovereign mid point” in *Sir Gawain*: “‘Madame,’ quoth þe myry mon, ‘Mary yow zelde . . .’” (1263). Applying to medieval texts Alastair Fowler’s suggestion that a symbolic, iconological, or organizational center can be located, where kingship or “sovereignty” is apt to manifest itself, or be figured, in a poem, Spearing identifies this line as the point at which a “sovereign” (Arthur) should appear, but fails to. It must be Gawain himself, then, Spearing reasons, who displaces the king in this romance, to occupy the poem’s most significant location: fittingly, since the knight is “Arthur’s surrogate,” “the hero,” a possessor of royal blood, and so forth (“Central and Displaced Sovereignty” [260]). A feminist reading accepting his notion of an all-important textual fulcrum might wish to emphasize instead the two feminine presences that are unarguably inscribed, along with Gawain, in this august position, a double inscription Spearing himself glances at in recommending Gawain’s claims: “At the centre of the poem’s central line, we find . . . Gawain himself. Appropriately enough, he is accompanied by his seductive hostess . . . but l. 1263 does not merely pair together Gawain and the lady; it places him between two ladies, with both of whom he is linked by alliteration—‘Madame,’ the hostess, and ‘Mary,’ the Blessed Virgin. This arrangement is powerfully symbolic” (261; italics mine). If two feminine figures materialize where a masculine figure of sovereign power might be expected, hedging between them a principal player of the masculine text, their appearance

might well indeed make a “powerfully symbolic” statement—on behalf of the feminine text.

<sup>11</sup>Morgan and the Lady’s most extensive and elaborate linking occurs, of course, at their introduction. The text nonetheless continues to refer to the presence of “þe ladyes” together on each occasion of communal merrymaking, and at least twice takes special pains to ensure their unmistakable identification (“Þe alder and þe zonge” [1316–17], “Boþe þe ladyes” [1373]).

<sup>12</sup>Both Kane and Hanning discuss the notorious difficulty of anchoring meaning, value, and emphasis in this poem.

<sup>13</sup>This metaphorical “knot of the feminine” is of course—like the “luf-lace”—an “endeles knot” different in kind from the pentangle.

<sup>14</sup>The “conysaunce of þe clere werkez / Ennurned vpon veluet” (2026–27) might or might not refer to the pentangle, since there is no earlier mention that the pentangle is displayed anywhere except on Gawain’s shield.

<sup>15</sup>The curious positioning of the pentangle and the Virgin’s image, each on one side of Gawain’s shield, has occasionally spurred attempts to read a relationship between them. To Novak, for instance, the pentangle is a metaphor for Mary’s “virgin knot” (185), itself a metaphor, while Kiteley seems to assume that the images function as interchangeable figures (48–49). Marina Warner, in contrast, finds a metonymic relation between the Virgin’s girdle and the state of incipient or actual motherhood in late medieval art (278–79). One might also suspect that the Virgin’s image on Gawain’s shield is a residue from an earlier period of Arthurian legendary history, since in the *Historia Britonum* Nennius also describes Arthur as carrying an image of the Virgin on his shield: “Arthur portavit imaginem sanctae Mariae perpetuae virginis super humeros suos” is usually treated by editors and translators as an error, to be rendered more accurately as “Arthur carried the image of the holy Mary, the everlasting Virgin, on his [shield],” not “on his shoulders” ‘super humeros suos’ (Morris 76, 35).

<sup>16</sup>Long before the advent of deconstructive readings, Englehardt made the casual but shrewd remark that “the 5 virtues assigned to Gawain in that *dilatatio* are not determinative or even quite discriminable” (219). Finlayson, moreover, reads the “papiayez,” “peruyng,” “tortors,” and “trulofez” in lines 611–13 as the devices of the courtly lover: “the author is quite clearly signalling to his audience that the Gawain of *this* romance is the Gawain of courtly reputation . . . the knight known for his ‘daliaunce and fair langage’” (9).

<sup>17</sup>Tolkien, Gordon, and Davis state flatly that “[n]othing like the symbolism attributed to [the pentangle] here is known anywhere else” (93n620), an opinion shared by others: “The symbolism of the pentangle is artificial, fabricated *ad hoc* for this poem, and has to be explained explicitly and meticulously because the hearer’s [sic] have little in their culture that goes out to meet it” (Friedman and Osberg 315). The ostensible necessity of yoking that signification to Gawain in an ostentatious fashion also prompts speculation: “It has recently been suggested that the reference in *Sir Gawain* to the ‘pentangel nwe’ (l. 636) means not only that the device was newly painted but also that it was newly imposed as a

sign, and that the author had just granted new arms to his hero” (Arthur, “Signs” 77, *Medieval Sign* 53).

<sup>18</sup>Lines 632–35 and 655–56 seem to be description, but lines 642–50 might indicate inspiration, aspiration, or prescription, while Gawain’s apparent failure as a pentangle knight suggests to some that his virtues, as encapsulated here, are somewhat exaggerated.

<sup>19</sup>Practices of this kind might constitute “a hermeneutics focused on the detail, which is to say, on those details of the female anatomy generally ignored by male critics and which significantly influence our readings of the texts in which they appear” (Schor, *Breaking* 160). On “concentricity” and the organization of female sexuality and the feminine unconscious, see Montrelay’s “Inquiry into Femininity.”

<sup>20</sup>Although I have coded the neck wound as masculine, reading from a conventional Freudian model of castration, it might also be argued that by virtue of its suggestive shape, the wound (and the consequent scar) can be retropped as feminine; as a cross-sectional representation of the circle, it is after all powerfully reminiscent of the vulvaic or vaginal “gash.” The wonderful expression “speculative turbulence” is Leo Bersani’s.

<sup>21</sup>There is “a peculiar imbalance in the symmetrical opposition of pentangle and girdle. For though the poet spends forty-three verses [sic] (623–65) carefully, almost pedantically, expounding the symbolism of the pentangle, he says nothing explicitly about the symbolism of the girdle” (Friedman and Osberg 301–02).

<sup>22</sup>Both “a ring [and] a girdle . . . are, under one aspect, universal vaginal symbols, under another, instruments of binding magic” (Friedman and Osberg 308–09).

<sup>23</sup>In an excellent structural reading of the poem, Hieatt mentions the *OED*’s gloss of the word *lace* as “a net, noose, snare” (341). Like Benson (40), he discovers a second lace besides the Lady’s—wrapped around the shaft of the Green Knight’s ax when that character appears at the Arthurian court (line 217). He reads line 2226, furthermore, as referring to a third lace, distinguishable from the Lady’s lace on Gawain’s body. All three nooses wind up, by a suggestive coincidence, around either the trunk of a man or the protruding shaft of a weapon (Hieatt 344, 350)—a coincidence in positioning that seems curious, to say the least.

<sup>24</sup>One critic notices that “the girdle is presented almost as an active agent of deceit—*þe falssyng*” (Mills 637). Gawain’s flaw, by his own reasoning, did not exist in him in any form whatever, neither as a trace nor as the possibility of a trace, before the seduction game. Rather, he imagines it as produced by the Lady’s game, as an unjust effect that is subsequently laid to his charge and interfaced with him (“*Now am I fawty and falce*,” “*cowardyse me taȝt*,” “*my kynde to forsake*” [2382, 2379, 2380; italics mine]). Dove contributes the important reminder that in both Middle English and Old French literature an antifeminist and misogynist Gawain is as fully a part of the Gawain tradition as is a courteous one.

<sup>25</sup>By resorting to the *blasme des femmes* tradition, Gawain deftly codes his own “faut” and masculine weakness in general as feminine, naming as “woman” all that is demonstrably wrong with man and invoking in shorthand form (“Adam,”

“Salamon,” “Samson,” “Dauyth”) certain misogynist strains in biblical history to support his weighting of the figure. In his hasty conversion of what Barbara Johnson calls “a difference *within* . . . into a difference *between*” (105), Gawain naively fails to notice, however, that his assignment of blame inadvertently registers an implicit assumption that ultimate power over men’s actions and destinies *rests with women*—an assumption useful to feminist readings (see, e.g., Heng).

<sup>26</sup>Much has been said about the traditional, innovative, or ambiguous use of color in *Sir Gawain* (see, e.g., Blanch, “Games”; Eagan; Kittredge; Robertson; and Zimmer), particularly by critics taking anthropological, folkloric, or religious approaches to the poem. An entire branch of the poem’s scholarship is in fact devoted to the interpretation of color. As indicated in this paper, my interest in the use of color is strictly local and limited.

<sup>27</sup>More traditional views on how a trope of disenchantment functions in the poem (represented by scholars ranging from Kittredge to the Indologist Ananda Coomaraswamy) center primarily on the interaction between the Green Knight and Gawain.

<sup>28</sup>Gawain’s insistence that the girdle is “þe token of vntrawþe þat I am tan inne,” a claim as subtle as it is exaggerated, represents a last, late attempt at fixing an identity for himself—even if it is that of the shamefaced wrongdoer and sincere penitent. This final stab at securing a known and knowable, clearly defined identity is little different from the earlier, more conspicuous attempt with the pentangle. As a ploy, however, it is no more successful: the court, by turning back Gawain’s moralizing, defers not only the girdle’s meaning but also the temptation and opportunity to stabilize an identity. A poignant misunderstanding is also registered in Gawain’s use of “trawþe” and “vntrawþe” here—apparently terms of considerable meaning for him. Critics rightly point out that “trawþe” to one idea, value, or character in the poem is instantly “vntrawþe” to another; the concepts, as they are exercised in the poem, are treacherously shifty and elusive, impossible to anchor.

<sup>29</sup>The cutting of a knot, Felman observes (an act whose prototypical example leaves the navel scar), performs again the unloosening of the tie with the mother: a “cut” knot is thus the witness of a necessary separation and rebeginning. Interestingly, the description of the pentangle also recalls, in its vulnerability, Lacan’s “Borromean knot”: everything comes apart once a crucial cut is introduced (Clément 184).

R. A. Shoaf’s close readings of the pentangle and girdle come to this conclusion: “The knots people tie in or with the green girdle . . . are signs of the human and human signs: *they will submit to analysis*, and life will go on. Unlike such geometrically perfect knots as the pentangle, transcendental in the universality of their form, these knots, knots like the knot of the green girdle, are not the termination of signification. They are rather terms of signification, leading to more terms, more signification, the endless finitude of interpretation” (“‘Syngne’” 165; italics mine).

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